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ABSTRACT

In this study students' perceptions of the workplace were analyzed to see how personal problems affected work ability. It was hypothesized that personal problems negatively affect students' ability to complete various types of tasks at work. It was also hypothesized that regardless of their attitudes toward the work environment, the more introverted students would be less comfortable in sharing personal problems than extraverted students. A questionnaire was administered to 100 students enrolled in an introductory psychology class to assess their work ability during periods of personal problems; comfort level regarding work environment and co-workers; and measurements of extraversion taken from the Eysenck Personality Inventory Scale. Most respondents (84%) reported feeling forced to ignore personal issues while at work, but the majority (88%) felt this to be a reasonable expectation. Nearly half (40%) reported that ignoring personal problems at work helped them feel better. Introverts were more likely to stay late to finish work than extraverts. Regardless of the type of work environment, stress and problems in their personal lives were found to affect work performance. Co-workers and employers need to be sensitive to situations that may arise outside the work environment for the college students whom they employ. (Contains 27 references.) (JDM)

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College Students' Integration of Education and Employment:

Perceived Intrusion of Personal Problems in the Workplace

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Abstract

Increasingly students strive to juggle the roles of learner and employee. For some students, outside employment enhances the quality of their educational experience, by exposing them to new perspectives, building competencies, and increasing perceived efficacy. For others, these dual responsibilities create conflicts and disruptive stress. This study explored students' perceptions of the workplace, and how problems in the personal sphere affected work ability. It was hypothesized that personal problems negatively affect ability to complete various types of tasks at work, and that many student employees feel hesitant to express their problems while on the job. It was also hypothesized that, regardless of the attitude toward the work environment, more introverted participants would be less comfortable in sharing personal problems than extraverted participants.

A questionnaire comprised of items assessing work ability during periods of personal problems, comfort level regarding work environment and co-workers, and questions measuring extraversion taken from the Eysenck Personality Inventory Scale, was administered to 100 students enrolled in an introductory psychology class.

Most respondents (84%) reported feeling forced to ignore personal issues while at work, but the majority of the participants (88%) felt this to be a reasonable expectation. Close to half (40%) reported that ignoring personal problems at work helps them feel better. On this variable, t-tests showed no significant gender differences, nor significant differences between introverts and extroverts.

Nearly half of the respondents (44%) are generally unable to focus their attention on work when personal issues arise. Roughly half (51%) find it difficult to write when personal problems occur. Over half found it difficult to participate actively in meetings (73%), speak in public (81%), and perform quantitative calculations (63%) at work when personal problems arise. Even when faced with outside personal problems, the majority of respondents still found it easy to type (61%) and answer phones (59%).

Over half of the respondents (56%) felt that they have to put on a mask while at work. A similar proportion of respondents found it helpful to talk with co-workers about personal issues outside of work.

Between-group t-tests revealed only one significant difference related to extraversion: introverts were significantly more likely to stay late to finish work than extraverts ($x=2.55$, s.d.=1.04, $n=42$ versus $x=2.00$, s.d.= 1.06, $n=4.0$, respectively; $t=2.36$, $df=80$, $p< .03$).

Regardless of type of work environment, stress and problems in respondents' personal life were found to affect work performance. This is why it is important for both co-workers and employers to be sensitive to situations that may arise for colleagues outside of the work environment.

Increasingly, students strive to juggle the roles of learner and employee by taking jobs while still in school. For some students, such outside employment actually seems to enhance the quality of their educational experience, by exposing them to new perspectives, building competencies, and increasing perceived efficacy. For others, these dual responsibilities create conflicts and disruptive stress. Given the pervasiveness with which students maintain outside employment, it is important to study the interface between these two activities.

The relationship between career and personal life is complex and highly variable across students. Individuals typically value both career and academic pursuits, and derive benefits to their self esteem through both types of activities. Not only does employment provide a source of livelihood, it also serves as a way to help others and do something socially meaningful. One's salary affirms the notion that the activity performed at work is valued by others. On the other hand, a student's academic and personal life are also extremely important; this sphere provides opportunities for scholarly and social achievement, and sources of support and intimacy. When the demands of the work and personal spheres collide, students often experience enormous stress. In order to clarify the reciprocal relationship between employment and education more fully, it is important first to have a better understanding of students' experience of the extent to which problems in the personal sphere intrude upon their workplace experience, how these intrusions are received within the workplace, and whether students are satisfied with employers' responses to their conflicts. Because myriad individual characteristics mediate how students negotiate conflicts between employment and education, including personality variables such as extraversion, such factors should be considered in analyzing the relationship between education and employment experiences.

The personality of an individual helps to shape the type of career they will have. There are many different character traits one may have that will play a role in the type of career that is pursued. An example of this could be a server (waitress/waiter). One that does enjoy interacting with others would not want to be in that type of profession. Selecting careers that don't fit ones personality can lead to stressful situations, discomfort and inability to complete tasks. When comparing introverted people versus extraverted people, the two personality types are expected shape patterns of interaction (Lee and Kanungo, 1984). This is because one introverts are less likely to interact with others rather than extraverts. With this in mind, one an introvert will not choose a career that deals with a lot of interaction with others.

Other personality traits, such as high motivation can also affect ones work ability. It has been said that motivation positively affects work ability in that people with high achievement motivation are potentially energetic performers with intense concentration on the job (Barling, & Boswell, 1995). Scholars who have emphasized work conditions have taken a more universalist stance on employee motivation: they have assumed that workers were motivated and that it is work conditions, not a lack of worker motivation, that inhibits employee effectiveness" (Schoorman & Schneider, 1988). These types of work conditions could include a non-social and or hostile environment in which one does not feel a sense of belonging or welcome. Regardless of the environment in which one works, although employee effectiveness may be low, it does not keep one from performing energetically with intense concentration. This shows that motivation is a good characteristic to have in being efficient no matter what the work environment may be.

When comparing gender to stress in personal and career life, one must realize that there are stereotypes of both women and men that deem them into "gender roles".

Anything subjecting one to those stereotypes can create a stressful situation. For instance, although they gain power and contribute to family status, working wives do not obtain more help in household work (Hofferth & Moore, 1984). This could be because men feel as though their responsibility is to bring income into the house, not complete household work, regardless if their spouse is working. Furthermore, studies show that even if wives do work, there is no evidence of them getting significantly more help from their husbands than nonworking wives (Hofferth & Moore, 1984). Because of this, women tend to add the employment work load to their household work" (Hofferth and Moore, 1979 as cited in Lee and Kanungo, 1984). This identifies how evident stereotypes still exist within a marriage and how stressed one could be because of them.

An analysis of a national survey of workers (Pleck, Staines, and Long 1978) revealed that time and scheduling problems were major aspects of work – personal sphere conflicts. These time factors included amount of time required by the job and work-family schedule incompatibility. In this survey, men more often reported problems owing to excessive work time, while schedule incompatibility was reported by women, particularly employed single mothers. These findings are also reasons why one might be in stressful situations. Planning a social life that may include school plays, parent/teacher meetings, etc. can cause problems when fitting them into a work schedule.

Despite this problem with scheduling and the good economic times of the last ten years, corporations expect everyone to put in more hours, be more productive, benefit the company more than they ever have. This expectation comes with an attitude of "If you are willing to work hard, you'll be rewarded. Corporate America seems to want us to become a nation of workaholics, dedicating all of our waking time to furthering the goals of profitability and shareholder dividends. But what's in it for us? Is it reasonable for parent,, non-parent, to be expected to live our lives for the corporation, forsaking our

family and personal life or us, male or female, partnered or single? And in the long run is it worth it for the corporation? Does it really make for a happy workforce that is more skilled, more productive and wanting to do a good job.

In a very basic way, the amount of the time spent at or for work limits the amount of time available for the academicas and other aspects of the personal sphere. The number of hours worked and the extent to which work is brought home varies greatly across occupations. A small study of male professionals (Gertsl, 1961) found that dentists worked 40-hour weeks and never brought work home. In contrast, professors, who worked 56 – 60 hours per week, brought work home and did no household chores. A recent survey of professional men (Mortimerr 1980) found that 59 percent of the sample considered their long job hours to be disruptive of family life" (Lee and Kanungo, 1984).

"A survey of professional men (Mortimer, 1980) showed that professionals had difficulties detaching themselves from the irritations and problems at work after work hours." (lee and kanungo, `1984). Moreover, "women's family roles have also significantly affected their labor force attachment, many exhibiting an intermittent work style. Various researchers (for example, Bernard 1971, Cooper 1963, Corcoran 1978 Super 1957 Young 1978) have identified career patterns involving career interruptions and combinations of work and family cycles. This may be due to the fact that women have such a huge responsibility at home and at work.

Relationships with supervisors are often stressors for individuals in organizations. Shostak (1980) says that blue-collar workers experience stress when supervision entails the pettiness of work rules and the relentless pressure to produce more and more. The fulfillment of a need for control and a need for recognition and acceptance as an individual is often impaired by relationships that exercise authority. As a result,

individuals try to bend or violate rules in attempts to regain some control over their work situation. Not only does this help them deal with the added pressures of their supervisors, it also helps to reduce stress. This may in-turn, also cause more stress because of one having the risk of getting in trouble because of rule violation.

Relationships with coworkers have also been found to be a stressor, at least when poor relations exist such as "those which include low trust, low supportiveness, low interest in listening to and trying to deal with problems that confront the organizational member" (French and Caplan 1972). Mistrust of coworkers has been found to be positively related to role ambiguity and inadequate communications resulting in low job satisfaction and in feelings of job-related threat to one's well-being (Buck 1972, French and Caplan 1972, Kahn el al, 1964). In addition, Kahn, Wolfe, Quinn, Snoek, and Rosenthal (1964) reported that poor relations with one's subordinates were highly related to feelings of threat with colleagues and superiors. Knowing this, it is important to have social support in the work environment.

In a study done looking at the role of social support in the process of work stress, researchers stated that: "Social Support has been defined broadly as "the availability of helping relationships and the quality of those relationship's" (Leavy, 1983, p.5). The term "stressors has generally been used in reference to environmental conditions that adversely affect health, whereas the term "strains" has been used to refer to the individual responses to the stressors (e.g., Jex, Beehr, & Roberts, 1992).

In defining these terms as such, a common interpretation of the direct effect model of social support presumes that social support reduces the level of strain regardless of the intensity of the stressors experienced (e.g., Beehr, 1985; Cohen & Wills, 1985; Eisenberger, Fasolo & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchinson, &

Sowa, 1986; Sullivan & Bhagat, 1992). This is evident because it is a lot easier to handle stress when someone is sharing the burden and relating to one's feelings.

Kirmeyer, & Dougherty, 1988; LaRocco, House & French, 1980) states that social support interacts with stressors to affect strains; specifically, the relationship between stressor and strain is though to be stronger for those individuals with low levels of support. This is true because it is more stress one has to endure alone which can be very difficult.

It appears that social support acts in a threefold manner. First, its primary role is to reduce strains, whereas its secondary role is to reduce the strength of the stressors themselves and to alleviate the effects of stressors on strains.(Viswesvaran, Sanchez, & Fisher, 1999). In order to reduce stress and strain, it is important to have good career strategies.

There are many different career strategies that people take to reduce the level of stress that they may have in the work place. They also use these strategies to create a more social work environment, which increases one's comfort level and furthermore, increases their work performance. While personal life may affect the workplace, stress in the workplace might affect ones personal life as well.

First, one needs to recognize that they alone cannot implement a career strategy (Souerwine, 1978). Careers are achieved by interaction with others who are in a position to furnish information and make decisions that forward the career plan (Souerwine, 1978). These people can include one's supervisors, family members, and colleagues to name a few. Thus an individual's personal relations, and interaction with others, are highly important in career planning and achievement. In order to successfully do this, one needs good interpersonal relations is effective communication" (Souerwine, 1978).

Without a career strategy development at the job-related level, can affect peer-related issues, organizational – related issues and family related issues (Souerwine, 1978). This happens because one has no order or direction. Moreover, they are lacking the skill of communication, which is important in whatever one may do.

All of the different aspects of stress mentioned can add a significant affect to the productiveness in ones work ability. Not feeling comfortable with the work environment one is in can increase stress levels to the point where one may find tasks impossible to complete. It is important that these issues are explored so that when one is not working at their normal rate of excellence, employers have other things to attribute it to, besides incompetence.

The present study explored students' perceptions of the workplace, and how problems in the personal sphere affected their work ability. It was hypothesized that personal problems negatively affect ability to complete various types of tasks at work, and that many employees feel hesitant to express their problems while on the job. Furthermore, it was also hypothesized that, regardless of the attitude toward the work environment, more introverted participants will be less comfortable in sharing personal problems than extraverted participants share.

Method

Participants

The participants for this experiment were students from a small, private, liberal arts undergraduate college located in Southeastern Pennsylvania. The questionnaire was given to a total of one hundred students enrolled in an introductory psychology class.

Apparatus

The questionnaire used in the experiment was comprised of items assessing work ability during periods of personal problems, comfort level regarding work environment and co-workers, and questions measuring extraversion taken from the Eysenck Personality Inventory Scale.

Results

Most respondents (84%) reported feeling forced to ignore personal issues while at work, but the majority of the participants (88%) felt this to be a reasonable expectation. Close to half (40%) reported that ignoring personal problems at work helps them feel better. On this variable, t-tests showed no significant gender differences, nor significant differences between introverts and extroverts.

Most participants felt work to be a reasonably sociable place. Only 14% felt that co-workers avoid eye contact in their work place. More than half (61%) agreed that employers are expected to greet employees each day, and 66% agreed that employees are expected to greet employers each day.

Nearly half of the respondents (44%) are generally unable to focus their attention on work when personal issues arise. Roughly half (51%) find it difficult to write when personal problems occur. Over half find it difficult to participate actively in meetings (73%), speak in public (81%), and perform quantitative calculations (63%) a work when personal problems arise. Even when faced with outside personal problems, the majority of respondents still found it easy to type (61%) and answer phones (59%). Between group t-tests on gender showed only one significant difference between males and females; females reported greater ease in answering phones at work when facing personal

problems than males (males: x=1.92, s.d.=1.32, n=13 versus females: x=3.07, s.d.=1.34, n=30, t=2.58, df=41, p<.01).

Over half of the respondents (56%) felt that they have to put on a mask while at work, but a similar proportion of respondents found it helpful to talk with co-workers about personal issues outside of work. The majority (61%) of this sample reported staying late to finish work. Less than a quarter (21%) often worry about work while at home. Consistent with this, only 12% must complete business work at home.

Most respondents reported having had experiences with extreme stress that interfered with workplace productivity at some point. Between-group t-test comparisons of those who reported such experience with those denying extreme stress experiences showed only one significant difference. Participants who reported extreme stress as having interfered with their work performance were more likely to find active participation in meetings easy when they had personal problems than those without experience with extreme stress (s=1.88, s.d.=1.23, n=34 versus x=1.00, s.d.= .00, n=8; t=2.02, df=40, p<.05).

Directionally adjusted scores on the Eysenck items were totaled to yield an extraversion score for each participant. A median split was performed to create two groups (introverted versus extraverted). Between-group t-tests revealed only one significant difference: introverts were significantly more likely to stay late to finish work than extraverts (x=2.55, s.d.=1.04, n=42 versus x=2.00, s.d.= 1.06, n=4.0, respectively; t=2.36, df=80, p< .03). The data also showed a trend suggesting that introverts were more likely than extraverts to find typing easy when they have personal problems outside of work (introverts:2.83, s.d.1.43, n=42 versus extraverts: x=2.28, s.d.=1.38, n=40; t=1.80, df=80, p=.01). Another trend showed extraverts to find public speaking easier then

introverts (extraverts: x=2.08, s.d.=1.37, n=40 versus introverts: x=1.60, s.d.=1.11, n=42; t=1.75, df=80, p<.08).

Qualitative analysis revealed that the majority (67%) of employees would prefer things to be different in their work environment. Of these, 40% expressed a preference for greater interpersonal openness. The majority of respondents (62%) who reported experiencing extreme stress that affected their performance at work attributed the stress to problems with personal relationships. School contributed to extreme stress for 20% of the group. Health problems (both their own and those of friends, family and pets) were the source of extreme stress for roughly a quarter of the respondents. Work itself was the source of extreme disruptive stress for 13% of the group.

Discussion

It was hypothesized that students' personal problems negatively affect their ability to complete various types of tasks at work, and that many employees feel hesitant to express their problems while on the job. Furthermore, it was also hypothesized that, regardless of the attitude toward the work environment, more introverted participants are less comfortable in sharing personal problems than extraverted employees.

Slightly over half of the respondents supported the hypothesis that personal problems negatively affect ability to complete various types of work tasks. Most students surveyed reported finding it especially difficult to speak in public when problems in the personal sphere were occurring. This could be because it may be difficult to engage in conversation, or to keep thoughts straight, when personal issues are causing one extreme stress. This is consistent with the finding that respondents also reported difficulty actively participating in meetings when bothered by personal issues. Active participation, which can include anything from initiating conversation, to listening

attentively, is closely related to public speaking. Other tasks that the majority of respondents found difficult to complete – quantitative calculations and writing - may be problematic because when one is doing those such tasks, concentration and focus is needed. When other personal issues are on one's mind, it is difficult to stay focused on the work task at hand. Typing and answering phones were found to be easier tasks to complete during periods of personal stress. These results can be attributed to the fact that both of these tasks don't take as much mindfulness or concentration. In typing, all one has to do is read what is on paper and put it on a computer screen. In answering phones at the workplace, one usually has a script to follow and after some obtaining some experience, one already knows how to direct calls.

When comparing respondents' answers in terms of gender, there was only one significant difference, which was that women found it easier to answer the phone while under personal stress. This may be related to the stereotype of women enjoying phone conversation more than men. Perhaps answering the phones proves to be easier for women because men usually don't like talking on the phone as their female counterparts. In dealing with personal problems, although all of the respondents found phone responding a relatively easy task, women were even more comfortable with it than men.

The hypothesis that employees feel hesitant to express their problems while on the job was supported. In addition, it was found that most employees felt that it was reasonable for employers to expect employees not to talk about personal problems while at work. Furthermore, close to half of the respondents reported that ignoring personal problems at work actually helped them to feel better. Both of these findings suggest that employees don't talk about their personal problems at work because they endorse the norms of the workplace, and find them psychologically beneficial much of the time. The majority of respondents reported that they found it helpful to speak with co-workers

about personal problems outside of work. Most students found work to be a sociable place. A sociable work environment can be interpreted to mean that most co-workers and employer/employee relationships are good, which may be why respondents are comfortable with, and find it helpful talking with co-workers outside of work, where they don't have the pressure of masking their personal feelings.

Although no significant difference between introverts and extraverts comfort in sharing personal problems, there was a significant difference between the two personality types in terms of their likelihood of staying late to finish work; introverts were more likely to stay late than extraverts. Introverts more so than extraverts found typing easier when they have personal problems. Furthermore, other results suggested that extraverts have an easier time speaking in public than introverts. All of these results are consistent with the characteristics of the personality types. Introverts rather than extraverts may be more likely to stay late to finish work because most introverts prefer staying by themselves generally. Extraverts would rather seek out social contexts and be around others, rather than stay at work. This can explain why introverts find it easier typing and why extraverts find it easier speaking in public. Both of these tasks are similar to the preferred activities of the two personality types. When typing, one is usually alone and/or sometimes secluded. In contrast, when speaking in public, an audience is present. Introverts would rather be alone than with others.

Although most students characterized their workplace as a sociable environment, results of the qualitative analysis showed that the majority of them would prefer things to be different in their work environments. Of those who answered, a little less than half expressed that they desired a more open and interpersonal atmosphere. This may be because although the respondents' work environments were social, they were not as interpersonally interactive as desired

Other quantitative results indicated that when experiencing extreme stress that affects their performance at work, the majority attributes it to problems with personal relationships. This may result because most students greatly value personal relationships. These types of relationships can involve friends, parents, boyfriends or girlfriends, and spouses. When problems with those types of relationships evolve, because most find them so important and valuable, it is understandable why it might affect one's work ability.

Regardless of one's work environment, stress and problems in one's personal life appear to affect ones work ability. This is why it is important for both co-workers and employers to be sensitive to situations that may arise in a work environment. It is also a good idea to have trained managers to be attentive to eployees' feelings and unique situations. Also, it would be useful for businesses and companies to have an outlet for employees dealing with taxing personal issues. Lastly, with over 67% of the respondents reporting that they would prefer things to be different in their ideal work environment, managers should actively participate in engaging in some type of communication to get employees' opinions about the type of environment they work in. People perform better and also work harder when they feel comfortable in the environment that they are working in, and also when they feel that their needs are being appropriately addressed. .

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